



# On the nurturing of strategic foresight: The Ubuntu perspective



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## ABSTRACT

We draw on ideas from the African humanistic philosophy of Ubuntu with existing approaches to propose alternative ways of nurturing strategic foresight in practice. Delineating Ubuntu as a transient organizing philosophy, we show how the integration of Ubuntu in everyday organizing could enhance relational pluralism, and in-turn strategic foresight. Embarking on some mild speculative expedition based on ideas from Ubuntu, we also outline some activities and organizing routines of team leaders that may contribute to encouraging employees to enact 'foresightful' actions in their situated practice. We conclude with implications of our study for organizing and some directions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Strategic foresight is crucial for successful organizing. Broadly conceived as the ability to identify and (re) configure sources of potentialities and limits into productive outcomes (Sarpong and Maclean, & Alexander 2013; ; Chia, 2008), the concept has become an important area of management studies. The current obsession with strategic foresight points to the derived theoretical implications of various conceptual as well as empirical studies which argue that strategic foresight as an organizing capability could lead to desirable outcomes such as ambidexterity, entrepreneurship, and innovation (e.g. Chia, 2008; Cunha, 2004; Fuller & Warren, 2006; Paliokaitė & Pačesa, 2014). In this regard, some legitimate efforts has been made in developing foresight theories and recipes for organizations on how to harness and nurture their strategic foresight potential (e.g. Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2006; Costanzo, 2004; Georghiou, 2008).

Nevertheless, with the exception of Wildman and Inayatullah (1996) and Wildman (1998), who draws on some indigenous 'ways of knowing' to develop a theory on the nurturing of foresight, a bulk of the theories and frameworks on strategic foresight are rooted in Western philosophical thought. Giving ontological priority to trans-individual actions as the site of the emergence of strategic foresight, such metaphysical orientation frequently precludes the conceptualization of strategic foresight as a distributed capability. The Western inspired literature therefore suggests two competing perspectives on the nurturing of strategic foresight. The first and dominant perspective conceptualizes strategic foresight as a by-product of episodic ultra-rational corporate futures exercises. This view is supported by the proliferation of well-planned corporate foresight methodologies which follow linear and clearly defined structures, and are often facilitated by external management consultants (Rohrbeck, 2012; von der Gracht, Vennemann, & Darkow, 2010; Hines and Bishop, 2006). The

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second perspective treats strategic foresight as social practice whose routines and activities are enacted on an everyday basis, sometimes with very little reflection, from an unintended action to an unintended outcome in the moment (Appiah and Sarpong, 2015; Sarpong, 2011; Cunha et al., 2006). Arguing for flexibility rather than structure, recurrent theory in contrast to the episodic paradigm has highlighted the process nature of strategic foresight by delineating strategic foresight as the creative evaluation and (re) configuration of sources of potentialities into future resources and productive outcomes (Chia, 2008; Sarpong and Maclean, & Alexander 2013; Sarpong and Maclean, & Davis, 2013; Sarpong and Maclean, 2014).

Consequently, while the two competing perspectives have enriched our nascent understanding of strategic foresight, organizational efforts to reconcile the demand for structure by the interventionist perspective and the flexibility advocated by the latter, has added to the complexity of strategic foresight being treated by managers as an application of theory, rather than a value creating activity (Gasper, 2015). To traverse this complication, we follow Wildman (1998) to argue that ideas from alternative philosophical perspectives could contribute to enhancing our understanding on the nurturing of strategic foresight. In this regard, we propose to integrate ideas from the African humanistic philosophy of *Ubuntu* with existing approaches to foresight to explore novel ways of nurturing and shoring up the strategic foresight potential of organizations. Our purpose in this paper, therefore, is to show how Ubuntu's indigenous 'ways of knowing' (Nkomo, 2011; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Aryee, 2011), could be leveraged to manage the adaptive formal and informal emergent structures that embodies and govern situated practices and organizing relationships in ways that could lead to the nurturing of strategic foresight in practice (Gasper, 2015). The Ubuntu perspective, as advanced in this paper, makes no attempt to replace or invalidate the Western-inspired perspectives on strategic foresight; rather, it complements them by seeking to cumulatively enrich our understanding of how strategic foresight as a distributed capability (McKelvey and Boisot, 2008; Tsoukas and Shepherd, 2004), can be nurtured within the contingencies of everyday organizing.

We contribute to the literature on strategic foresight in the following ways: First, while prior research has identified strategic foresight as an outcome of everyday relationships and interactions, we draw on the Ubuntu philosophy as a meta-theoretical lens to extend our understanding of strategic foresight as both a trans-individual attribute and a distributed capacity that could be employed to nurture and harness the strategic foresight potential of organizations. Second, we draw on the organizing logics of Ubuntu to identify some activities and organizing routines of team leaders which we believe could open up possibilities for rethinking how middle managers, by their actions and routines for example could potentially help to nurture the strategic foresight potential of their organization.

The paper is structured as follows: First we explore existing perspectives on the nurturing of strategic foresight. Next, we consider the nature of Ubuntu in contemporary organizing. Following this we articulate the rationale and logics of the Ubuntu humanistic philosophy, and go further to develop a transient model to show how Ubuntu could enhance relational pluralism and in turn the enactment of strategic foresight in teams. We then go on to identify activities and organizing routines of team leaders that potentially support the development of Ubuntu organizing in practice. We then conclude the paper with probable directions for future research.

## 2. Nurturing strategic foresight

This section explores the theoretical and practical aspects of strategic foresight. We outline the established approaches to the nurturing of strategic foresight, and attempt to demonstrate why Ubuntu as an organizing framework could extend our

**Table 1**  
Established approaches to nurturing strategic foresight.

Area of difference	Corporate foresight exercises	Practice approach to foresight
<i>Broad theoretical assumption</i>	Strategic foresight as a derived outcome of ad hoc corporate futures exercises.	Strategic foresight emerges out of organizing practices in context geared towards the creative evaluation and reconfiguration of sources of potentialities into present and future resources and productive outcomes.
<i>Primary emphasis</i>	On the purposeful generation of probable futures or heuristic narratives during corporate futures exercises and scenario planning workshops.	On strategic conversations, temporal reflexivity-in-practice, adaptive learning, prospective sense-making and improvisation within contingencies of the moment.
<i>Process</i>	<i>characteristics</i>	Relies on the contribution of external consultants or futurists whose role is to facilitate the filtering and combination of information dispersed in time into meaningful, future-oriented knowledge.
<i>Organizing logic</i>	Problematizes the use of external consultants. Strategic foresight in the form of strategizing emerges from everyday organizing practices that involve micro-interactions and the interpretation of subtle cues in practice.	
<i>Limitations</i>	Rational episodic intervention organised around a framework of scientific rationality'. Often appear as an act of imposing dominant logic on subaltern groups, either through the truncation of alternative scenarios, or through an ideological understanding of outcomes.	Flexible, relational in context, perpetually becoming-' ongoing way of thinking in the organisation about the identifying organizing practices and activities that can be counted as partly constitutive of strategic foresight.

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